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Household behaviour and sustainability: from inactive to involved, and what lies in-between

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Abstract
In this working paper we present the initial findings from a 2013 postal survey into green and ethical household behaviour. 457 usable questionnaires were returned from 3000 householders in a large northern city in the UK, giving a response rate of 15%. Respondents provided details about their levels of participation in green and ethical activities, their attitudes towards such behaviour, recent purchase decisions in different product categories, and information use and dissemination. Questions were derived from an earlier piece of qualitative research in which we carried out in-depth interviews with self-identified green consumers and a previous quantitative questionnaire. Our latest findings provide evidence to support varying levels of involvement in green and ethical activities, with differences in participation, attitudes, and information seeking. These differences are discussed and marketing implications identified.

Keywords
Green/ethical consumption, household, behaviour, attitudes, information sources

Track
Ethical issues in marketing

Introduction

Changes in consumption behaviour across all sectors are needed now if current UK government policy targets around energy efficiency, waste reduction, and domestic recycling to name just a few are to be met. As responsible marketers, we are interested in promoting sustainable consumption practices and should be able to target the so-called 'green consumer' with ease. However, we have largely failed to do so. Indeed, academics consistently question whether there is any such thing as a straightforward green consumer (McDonald et al 2012). There is much evidence in the academic literature of the complexity of green consumer behaviour (Young et al 2010) yet still expectations from marketers that consumers engaged in one green behaviour may be encouraged into another i.e. 'spillover' (Lanzini and Thøgersen 2014), or be persuaded by green product advertising (Kong and Zhang 2014). Thus, the much vaunted green revolution so confidently expected in the 1970s and 1980s has not actually happened to the extent predicted (Davis 1993), despite the daily media presence of debates around climate change, strange weather, and catastrophic events (Defra 2012; Neate 2014).

In this working paper, we investigate the reported behaviour of householders to understand their priorities, attitudes, and use of information sources around green and ethical practices, and how these factors are interrelated in terms of levels of active/inactive involvement. Specifically, we are interested in the kinds of activities in which householders participate, including purchasing, to generate a holistic picture of (non)engagement. We present findings from a large scale postal survey that we carried out in 2013. The questionnaire we used was developed from our findings from a previous qualitative study into green consumer behaviour, and a follow-up quantitative study (McDonald et al 2012). With our current survey, we have updated our knowledge of sustainable consumer behaviour within the household and present a preliminary analysis below. A full discussion incorporating factor analysis and cluster analysis will be ready to deliver to the conference in July 2015.

Brief background

There is a huge literature on many aspects of green and ethical consumers and consumption, especially in marketing and related disciplines e.g. psychology, environmental studies, tourism, ecology, health, and sociology. It is largely accepted that consumers substantially contribute to ecological problems, both directly and indirectly (Schrader and Thøgersen 2011). As such, many studies have attempted to understand the 'complexity of consumers' ethical decisions' (Newholm and Shaw 2007:255) via particular concerns or product sectors, for example the behaviour of employees at work (Gregory-Smith et al 2014), the role of information (Oates et al 2008), voluntary simplicity (Cherrier 2007), negative publicity (Brenton and ten Hacken 2006), fair trade (Coles and Harris 2006), clothing (Shaw et al 2006) and across several product sectors (McDonald et al 2009). The market for sustainable and ethical products certainly exists, as evidenced by sales of fair trade products in the UK increasing by 14% in 2013 compared to 2012 (Fairtrade Foundation 2014) but the landscape of sustainable consumption is a multi-faceted one, with many potentially competing criteria: for example, between both green and grey (non-green) factors such as energy efficiency and price, and also within the general ethical context itself, for example organic versus airmiles, or social issues versus environmental ones. Several factors shape the society in which individuals make their (non) consumption choices, which are still not fully understood. We contribute to this extant debate by highlighting the various ways in which individuals engage with being green.

Methodology

A postal survey was conducted in November 2013 in which we sent out 3000 questionnaires to a random sample of residents in the Woodseats area of Sheffield, a large city situated in the north of England. Names and addresses were purchased from a commercial data provider. A specific geographical area was carefully selected in order to ensure the relatively homogeneous exposure

of respondents to recycling facilities, consumption outlets and local infrastructure and initiatives. The selected area has a demographic profile (age distribution, economic activity, qualifications, household tenure) which is in line with UK norms (McDonald and Oates 2003).
Respondents were asked to report on their participation in a variety of green and ethical activities (see Table 1) on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 'Always' to 'Not at all'. Their attitudes to green/ethical issues were assessed via a series of statements (see Table 2) to which they were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement, again on a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. We then asked respondents to think about their recent purchases in the following categories: large electrical appliance, medium-sized electrical appliance, small electrical appliance, 'everyday' item (fmcg) and holiday. For each category we asked respondents to indicate the information source(s) used in making their purchasing decision. Demographic information was also collected.
457 useable questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 15% which is not unreasonable for a survey of this kind (Saunders et al 2002). More women than men responded to the questionnaire (57% and 43% respectively). The demographic profile of respondents revealed relatively high response rates from the over 55 age group.

Preliminary findings

Participation

The three activities in which people most frequently participated were: recycle household waste, reduce energy consumption and reduce water use (Table 1). Participation in other activities tended to be at a much lower rate and to be much more variable as suggested by our earlier qualitative research.

Activity	%Always/ Usually	Median[a]	Mean[a]	Std. Deviation[a]
Recycle household waste	95%	1	1.31	0.634
Reduce energy consumption	94%	2	1.57	0.625
Reduce water use	93%	1	1.47	0.688
Buy low energy light bulbs	85%	1	1.67	0.953
Reuse things	47%	3	2.46	0.994
Avoid over-packaged goods	46%	3	2.66	0.991
Use local shops	45%	3	2.49	0.794
Avoid driving	40%	3	2.75	1.202
Use public transport	37%	3	2.87	1.192
Boycott unethical companies	37%	3	2.90	1.211
Compost household waste	34%	4	3.37	1.685
Avoid flying	33%	3	3.21	1.436
Buy locally produced goods	31%	3	2.79	0.800
Buy fair-trade	24%	3	2.95	0.868
Choose organic	8%	3	3.55	0.861

[a] Based on a 5 point Likert-type scale (1: Always, 2: Usually, 3: Sometimes, 4: Rarely, 5: Never)

Table 1: Participation in green/ethical activities

Attitudes

While respondents generally reported positive attitudes to green/ethical activities, this appeared to be passive in nature as only 31% agreed/agreed strongly with the statements about (i) actively seeking information and (ii) telling other people (Table 2).

	% Agree/ agree strongly	Median[a]	Mean[a]	Std. Deviation[a]
I am not really interested in green or ethical issues.[b]	71%	2	2.18	0.943
I try to be green or ethical in every aspect of my life	66%	2	2.33	0.858
It's my duty to investigate the impact my choices have on the environment.	62%	2	2.28	0.790
I take on new 'green/ethical' activities if I know they will make a difference.	58%	2	2.48	0.862
I participate in one or two specific areas of 'green/ethical' activity.	49%	3	2.61	0.909
I actively seek information on how to adopt a 'green/ethical' lifestyle.	31%	3	2.92	0.878
I often tell other people what I know about how to be more green and/or ethical.	31%	3	3.08	1.025

[a] Based on a 5 point Likert-type scale (1: Strongly agree, 2: Agree, 3: Neither agree nor disagree, 4: Disagree, 5: Strongly disagree)
[b] This statement has been reverse scored for consistency; a lower score indicates disagreement and the % represents those who disagree/disagree strongly.

Table 2: Attitudes to green/ethical issues

Information seeking

For purchases of electrical appliances and 'everyday' products, the majority of respondents cited in-store information as the most frequently used source of product information. The Internet was the second most cited source. Use of other sources varied according to product category (see Table 3).

	Product				
Source	Large	Medium	Small	Everyday	Holiday
In-store information e.g. leaflets	57	54	70	75	28 (travel agent)
Internet	44	44	27	7	57
Friend or relative	27	30	15	17	39
Manufacturer's brochure/packaging	24	25	22	19	36 (brochure)
Consumer publication e.g. 'Which'	24	21	10	4	3
Newspaper/magazine article or TV programme	11	12	10	14	21
Specialist source of 'green/ethical' information	4	3	2	5	3
Other	5	5	5	7	5

Table 3: Sources of information (% of respondents citing each source according to product category)

Information sources for holidays exhibited different a pattern, with the Internet most commonly used (57%) followed by the other most frequently cited sources of friend/relative, travel brochures and travel agents.

These findings are the results of a preliminary descriptive analysis and the outcomes of further statistical analysis of our extensive dataset will be presented at the conference.

Conclusion

Our survey has produced potentially important findings for marketers in terms of the extent and the scope to which householders engage in green and ethical activities. Levels of engagement are linked to use of different information gathering strategies and a (un)willingness to share relevant information or good practice with others. There is a lack of activity evident in approximately a fifth of our sample, balanced by a similarly sized group of very active householders. Those performing between these two levels are perhaps the most interesting and perplexing, as their activities appear to be specifically concentrated on a particular aspect of behaviour (illustrated in Table 2 where 49% strongly agree/agree they focus on selected areas), which could easily look to

be a fragmented and inconsistent approach from an outside (marketing) perspective. We offer a means to theorise such consumer patterns in our conference presentation, and suggest that as a way forward for research, a return to more qualitative and in-depth methods in a follow-up study will surface further the complexities inherent in the ways these consumers choose to approach being green.

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